Learning Negotiations Through a Sports Metaphor: False Start?

Negotiating is pervasive and potentially misapplied[i]. Pervasive as people negotiate with every decision. Potentially misapplied as people learn this skill. Learners often learn a new skill by leveraging familiar concepts. Referencing a familiar concept onto a new one eases the transition. For example, when learning car driving skills, teachers relate fundamental concepts (steering, braking, etc.) to what students mastered by riding bikes or running golf carts. This transference helps students learn the new skill.[ii] However, it also builds invisible boundaries inadvertently limiting how the novice understands the new skill. This article examines how negotiations are potentially misapplied due to the learning process.

When Americans[iii] learn negotiations a sports-based metaphor is a popular transference aid.[iv] For decades this was reasonable. Americans liked competitive negotiations where, like sports, the outcome featured winners and losers. This frame may be so strong, that even as negotiation strategies matured, the metaphor might still serve as a comfortable, albeit inadequate, tool. This article suggests that as U.S. negotiating strategies mature, moving from distributive contests to cooperative processes, Americans may still use sports metaphors to learn negotiating. This framework may skew the application of cooperative negotiations. This argument has two parts. First, *Cooperative Negotiations* highlights the principles of a mutually-beneficial strategy. Second, *Sports Metaphors and Negotiations*, outlines the U.S. experience with sports metaphors and negotiation. This association may foster misapplication when cooperative negotiations are learned using the most popular sport among adult males; American football.

Cooperative Negotiations

In the 1980s, negotiators began using more cooperative approaches to problem-solving. Leaving a contentious era where management and labor negotiations featured low-trust, power-over, win-lose staring contests, cooperative negotiations changed how people solved issues. Negotiators stopped defeating each other and began defeating the problem. Allegorically, chairs were moved to one side of the table and the problem was in front of the negotiators rather than between them. This novel process was fruitful; however, the metaphor used to teach negotiations remained, in many ways, consistent. As much as negotiating thought progressed, the skill is often learned using a familiar metaphor – sports. Learning negotiations using any metaphor influences how the learner applies the skill as well as setting expectations on how the other negotiator will engage in negotiations.

The Cooperative Negotiation Strategy (CNS) advances Fischer and Ury's Interest-Based Negotiations (IBN) concept. The CNS helps attain a mutually satisfactory outcome while *actively* managing relationships. CNS also seeks high levels of personal and/or process trust that allows for the power-sharing and information exchange needed to *categorize* and *prioritize* parties' interests. These categorized and prioritized interests become the criteria to first develop options and then select the outcome best meeting both side's top needs. The CNS is one of five strategies within the Negotiation Preferences and Styles Chart (NPSC: Figure 1). Unlike other NPSC strategies, the CNS creates new value for both parties while building enduring relationships. At its core, a CNS outcome is better than anything a party could develop independently.

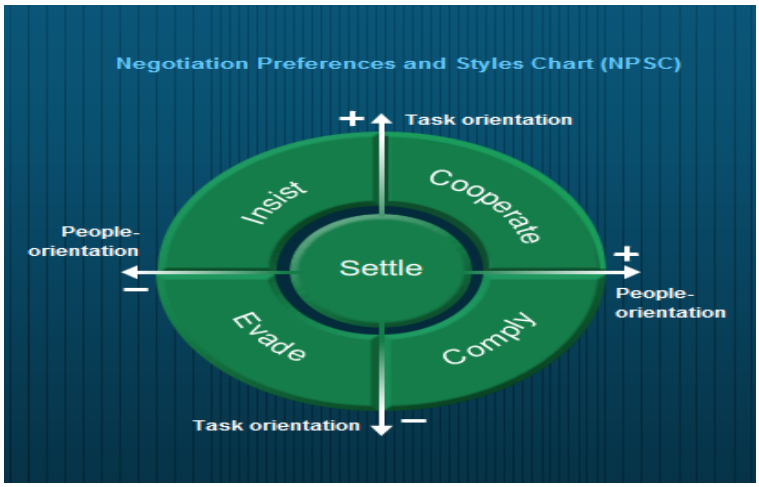

Figure 1. The NPSC

Sports Metaphors and Negotiations

In the 20th century, there was a strong affinity for using sports to help frame and learn negotiations. There was philosophical consistency between sports and negotiations. Both were competitive; the objective was "winning" – either championships or profits. This congruency made learning negotiations through a sports metaphor transparent. Negotiators were taught to have "game plans", run a "full court press", "hit home runs", and if needed, "hit below the belt"; but never be "out in left field".[v]

The most popular and profitable U.S. sport is American football. It was efficient at teaching 20th century negotiations. The game not only permeated American culture, but former players took their sports experiences into commerce and elsewhere. This metaphor was especially useful in the era of competitive negotiations because it required a party to overcome their opponent as they drove, yard-by-yard, to their desired outcome. Football's linear approach was spectacular in its clarity when transferred to business. Progress was measured in customers (yards) gained and territory (customers or yardage) was denied the competition (opponent). Teams never yielded. Even the "Hail Mary" was an available tactic for desperate times.[vi] Within the competitive, management versus union paradigm, this metaphor worked. Football's tactics were also useful tools in these negotiations. Among them:

1. to gain advantage over the opponent, trickery was encouraged
2. you only trusted people on your team. The opponent was a vilified "enemy",
3. information was encoded to benefit only your side,
4. power was used "over" the opponent,
5. scouts were used to gain information from the opponent, and
6. referees were required because the foul only happened when they saw it.

Football is a broadly-accepted metaphor for teaching negotiations in the U.S. not only due to sheer popularity, but also because a majority of mainstream adult men use football as their perceptual filter.[vii] These males grew up with football and still enjoy the spectacle.[viii] This affinity for football remained strong as U.S. businesses evolved their techniques from competitive to more cooperative negotiations. This consistency may impact how modern negotiations might be learned.

Though the use of the football metaphor is consistent, the metaphor's content has evolved. Regarding CNS, the "vilified" opponent is now a co-teammate as the problem becomes the new opponent. This team now leverages their mutual strengths to "move down the field". Instead of fighting over ball control, success lies in how teams develop options. Many of the six tactics above are now applied to the problem rather than the negotiating opposite. Through this cooperative, but essentially linear process, the proverbial "end zone" of success is possible for *both negotiators*. This seems a reasonable adaptation of a popular sports metaphor to teach the CNS' intent. However, this modified metaphor, while useful, raises potential misunderstandings in potentially invisible "fault-lines."

The first fault-line assumes negotiators see the process similarly. If the negotiators are from differing cultures, they will rely on culturally-congruent metaphors. Even if they recognize the "football" metaphor and are on the same field, they may play their version of football. This could surprise the U.S. negotiator as teammates from another culture figuratively lateral the "ball" backwards after forward progress, allowing for some losses in the negotiating process. They might also propose options that don't appear to make direct progress to the outcome. This is a key point; a U.S. student of the football-to-negotiations metaphor would judge their teammate's actions differently than the teammate from a contrasting culture. Using a soccer-to-negotiations metaphor, these negotiators might (and sometimes must) yield during the negotiations to ensure a better subsequent "play" later in the negotiations. Using American football-to-negotiations metaphor, this perplexes the American negotiator and can harm trust, as well as reduce power- and information sharing – essential elements to successful CNS outcomes. This illustration of a fundamental contrast between different perspectives could derail the best of cooperative negotiating intensions.

The second fault-line continues to draw on a major feature of the American football metaphor – it is a linear process. American football only rewards forward progress and doesn't accept lost yards. In American football, the 10 yard line is not revisited once it is crossed. This translates to a linear perspective in negotiations. Thus, in American negotiations, once there is agreement on a sub-area, U.S. negotiators are loath to revisit. Recently, a U.S. negotiator engaged in a cooperative process. In the middle of this amicable format, the U.S. negotiator was asked to revisit a sub-agreement. The U.S. negotiator was frustrated to "…go back into my territory…." and accused the opposite of not living up to "…negotiating in good faith."[ix] This aversion to revisiting issues is consistent with the linear perspective that accompanies learning negotiations using American football metaphor.

In another, broader example of the American preference for linear negotiating, a variety of negotiating exercises were observed. Key was the choice of writing instrument – the novice American negotiators overwhelmingly chose ink pens. During the exercises, palpable frustration set in as they realized the need to re-negotiate sub-elements previously agreed upon. During the exercise debriefs, the student negotiators expressed surprise that cooperative negotiations required making "tentative" agreements. They preferred to "move the chains and get to the next play." Revisiting was perceived as failure to run the negotiations "play" correctly the first time; revisiting was not congruent with the linear approach of their preferred learning metaphor, American football. Through more practice, they learned to adjust their negotiations expectation away from their preferred linear process.[x]

Another potential hidden fault-line exists because negotiators, using the sports metaphor, may assume all parties have the same desired outcome. In reality, what one negotiator needs could be very

different from another, even as they solve the same problem. Parties vary in their substantive, psychological and/or procedural needs. Additionally, some seek solutions while others are satisfied to only cope with the symptoms. This reality runs counter to the fairly homogenous objective their learning metaphor.

A fourth potential fault-line assumes negotiators, like football players, have equal motivation to perform. In football, the focus is giving a 110% effort on the field; movies raise commitment to a cult-like level. "Rudy", "The Blind Side", and "The Junction Boys" resonate with 110% efforts.[xi] In reality, negotiators vary in their commitment; the Air Force Negotiation Center defines negotiation as a process where conflict exists between parties and "…*at least one of them* (emphasis added) is motivated to resolve the conflict."[xii] This one-sided motivation reality runs counter to the football metaphor. In negotiations, a party may not know there is a problem or know there is a problem and choose to ignore it. Regardless of the reason behind the lack of motivation, a novice American negotiator, learning through the football metaphor, would not use rapport-building as a motivation tool, but rather the need to use aggressive tactics to develop motivation. The second factor, "…on the field…" is an interesting compartmentalization of American negotiations. In football, as well as American negotiations, the focus is on the task. Action off the "field" is a distractor. In other cultures, what happens away from the field is often essential to the process and demands attention.

Finally, a fault-line may exist because novice negotiators may have assumptions about team-members perspective of risk, communications, and problem-solving. American football executes from a prescriptive playbook. This reflects a low-context, task-oriented perspective, reflecting not only in the football metaphor, but also a larger, Western perspective on negotiations. Using the comfort of the football metaphor, the U.S. negotiator might expect the negotiation process to be a series of prescriptive plays from the playbook. Between "plays", negotiators "huddle" to openly express their concerns about what happened on the last play, choose the next "play", and "break" expecting everyone is ready for execution. In other cultures, the "play" book for negotiations may reveal differing perspectives of risk, communications, and problem-solving . Again, using American football-to-negotiations metaphor, this different perspective may perplex the American negotiator and harm trust, as well as reduce power-and information sharing – essential to successful CNS outcomes.

What should the learner do – suffer the "false start" penalty? Not hardly; our nature is to use metaphors. Rather, minimize the unintended "fault-lines", with three steps – *Recognize, Realize,* and *Adjust*. First, *Recognize* that regardless of the metaphor used, "fault-lines" exist. Estimate *your* "fault-lines," and how they impede cooperative negotiations. Work to minimize the impact. *Realize* your partners also suffer similarly. Understand how they learned negotiations; suspend judgment when they don't negotiate as you expect. See the "why" behind their negotiation "plays". Finally -- *Adjust*. A cooperative outcome doesn't focus on the messy process (it is rare to find someone with an identical learning metaphor). Take the long view and support the overall interests while remaining flexible during the process. Enjoy the journey while discovering the destination!

Endnotes

[ii] Special thanks to Mr Hank Finn, Mr. Paul Firman and Mr Dave O'Meara, all AF Negotiation Center faculty members for their observations, ideas and edits during the creation of this article

[ii] Lin Yang, Steve Hanneke, and Jaime Carbonell. "A Theory of Transfer Learning with Applications to Active Learning." (undated). Accessed 06 June 2013, http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~liuy/atl.pdf

[iii] The term "American" in this article is a general reference to people living in the United States.

[iv] Cohen, Steven P. "Negotiation is not a Competitive Sport." (2004). Accessed 20 October 2014, http://iveybusinessjournal.com/topics/the-workplace/negotiation-is-not-a-competitive-sport

[v] Wood, Craig, "Never Let a Good Sports Analogy Go To Waste." (2012). Accessed 15 October 2014, https://claritygroupinc.wordpress.com/2012/06/20/never-let-a-good-sports-analogy-go-to-waste/

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[vii] Elgin, Suzette H. "Metaphor in Mediation is a _ What_?" (2001) Accessed 20 November 2014, http://www.adrr.com/adr4/metaphor.htm

[viii] Gaines, Cork. "Chart: The Popularity of Football in the US Continues to Grow." (2014) Accessed 15 November 2014, http://www.businessinsider.com/football-popular-sports-2014-1

[ix] Author's observation of a senior executive engaged in a complex mock negotiation. Observed in Spring 2014.

[x] Author's observation of hundreds of students in mock negotiations. Observed from 2007-2014.

[xi] "Sports in Movies." (2014). Accessed 05 September 2014, http://www.sportsinmovies.com/best-movies/football.asp

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